

Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments¹

Executive Summary

This policy brief outlines the root causes of unsafe learning environments in Malaysian public schools, what currently works to address said unsafe environments, and what must change. Central to the understanding of “safe and inclusive learning environments” is the need for a universal definition that places students’ well-being at its core. This policy brief is premised on the understanding that a safe and inclusive learning environment is not merely a physical space that ensures students are protected from physical threats and harm, but should also be an environment that upholds human dignity and supports students’ emotional and mental well-being. It should be an environment that makes every effort to equally enable each student to feel secure and comfortable in order for them to reach their full potential. Four root causes of unsafe learning environments undermine this: *a)* the lack of student-centric approaches and practices; *b)* the lack of initiatives to prevent and address prejudices and biases; *c)* the abuse of student disciplinary practices; and *d)* the lack of independent accountability and enforcement mechanisms. For all stakeholders to agree on the standards to which safe and inclusive learning environments should be established, this policy brief proposes the prevention of three broad categories of harm, along with effective redress for said harms. These harms include: *a)* harms resulting from cultural practices, traditions, beliefs, and abuses of power and authority (including by acting outside of the scope of authority) that are imposed upon students; *b)* harms caused by ignoring or neglecting students with different needs (ranging from physical disabilities to different learning and well-being needs, including privacy needs), or by dismissing these needs altogether; and *c)* direct or indirect harms caused by poor top-down communication models between decision-makers and practitioners (i.e., educators and education service officers), as well as by poor top-down enforcement by the Ministry of Education (MOE) on its own policies and in fulfilling its duties and obligations according to the law.

Research shows the need for both meaningful student participation in decision-making and strong, unbiased enforcement. Best practices do exist and are appreciated by both students and teachers, but they are implemented inconsistently across Malaysian public schools. Transparency remains key for two purposes—firstly, to hold power accountable so that students and whistleblowers can feel safe and trust that violations will not occur and recur, and secondly, to ensure that the issues and ongoing challenges (including study findings, and resource allocations and audits) are easily accessible within the public domain and can be subjected to public scrutiny.

This policy brief offers policy alternatives and policy recommendations for consideration, and should be implemented to complement the broader Malaysian educational goals. These recommendations are as follows:

- **Improve pre-service and in-service training, and integrate bias training into teacher certification.**
- **Establish multi-disciplinary teams within schools, and include the Public Ombudsman as a recognised independent expert** to address some of the more severe issues of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.
- **Raise awareness and reinforce gender sensitivity training** so that harmful cultures and discriminatory practices can be effectively eradicated.
- **Empower students** to be active proponents of inclusivity and to be able to conduct policy dialogues with school authorities to ensure safe and inclusive learning environments.

¹Developed by KRYSS Network, in collaboration with the Tiada.Guru Campaign and Pride in Research.

- **Establish clear, non-arbitrary standard operating procedures (SOPs):** The SOPs should be considered a living code of ethics, regularly reviewed and accompanied with step-by-step actions for implementation and enforcement. Certification for the comprehension of SOPs should be required for educators and education service officers, and they should be bound for vicarious liability if violations are not promptly and fully reported.
- **Make detailed background checks mandatory** during the hiring process of teachers, sports coaches, volunteers, teaching assistants, guards, canteen workers and others, to reduce outright racist, judgmental and bad behavioural tendencies towards children.
- **Decentralise power and decision-making within local multistakeholder and multi-disciplinary teams,** in order to prioritise student-centric approaches and substantive student involvement. Decision-making power should be transferred to the district and school levels without reinforcing power hierarchies.
- **Ensure transparency in MOE study findings and in the reporting of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.** This transparency is essential in order to increase public trust, lay the foundation for conversations, and encourage the political will to address the issues effectively. Studies by the MOE must adopt a rigorous research methodology and be clearly articulated in the report so that it can be critically reviewed and interrogated by external parties.
- **Establish independent, wide-ranging whistleblower protection.** Students, teachers and parents who report educator misconduct must be heard, accepted and provided with critical physical protection and mental-emotional support by qualified independent external parties.
- **Mainstream and standardise best practices in all schools.** The extent to which students get to enjoy safer and more inclusive learning environments should not be personality-driven, but quality-driven. This leads to the issue of funding for public schools, along with the need to conduct a mandatory resource audit to determine minimum staffing ratios, comprehensive teacher training costs (including for dedicated time allowance and ongoing gender sensitivity training), infrastructure investments, and costs for the implementation of all best practices systematically with consistency.

- **Establish an enforcement-capable Public Ombudsman in schools.** A Public Ombudsman must be able to provide independent whistleblower protection, investigate cases of misconduct either by report or by its own initiative, and take disciplinary, punitive, restorative or even legal action against officers. The Public Ombudsman must be staffed by counsellors, child rights legal experts, social case workers and vetted community members. It must be able to monitor each school directly and serve as an independent ally to assist students in reporting alleged crimes directly to the police and/or the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC). The Public Ombudsman has the key benefit of being able to facilitate investigations (into misconduct or legal matters) to be conducted by independent experts. The Public Ombudsman must be a Constitutional body outside the Executive Branch of the government, instead of within it. It should have transparent, regular reports of its actions, be subjected to strict deadlines to conclude investigations (to ensure severe cases do not languish), be able to enforce decisions on actions to be taken resulting from investigations, and be audited by a body outside of the government.

Finally, integral to all of the policy alternatives and recommendations is the need to be centred around the needs, lived experiences and feedback of students. In addition to adopting a policy on requiring student-centric pedagogical approaches, a student-centred collaborative approach should also be adopted in identifying stakeholders whom students trust to advocate for their rights. Students should be able to choose who sits at the table with them for cases of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault. For criminal cases, the inclusion of legally-trained professionals should be mandatory, but even so, the choice of who sits at the table should remain with the student. The necessary time should be provided to the affected student(s) to speak with, and feel sufficiently comfortable with, the different stakeholders. Accountability must be upheld if students' input is ignored, and students, in particular, should have veto power over decisions that can affect them negatively or add more harm.

“Harms must be recognised as harms when perpetrated against students, and must be equally addressed no matter if the students are perceived as “good” or “bad”.

1.0 Introduction

"The highest mission of education is not only to cultivate people who can solve problems, but also to foster individuals who can coexist with differences and keep learning in a complex world."

—Liu Bowen (student)²

Sautner, who examined the connection between inclusive education and violence prevention in schools, concluded that safety cannot exist without inclusion, and that safety and inclusivity are not two separate issues.³ Sautner went on to further emphasise how important it is to distinguish between the school as a physical location, where aspects of infrastructure and facilities are considered, and the school as a system that perpetuates practices that can aggravate the challenges students face, which in turn can inevitably lead to students feeling unsafe. The latter distinction of the school includes the types of support available in schools to help victims of bullying, especially when unequal power dynamics are involved and violence (e.g., threats, intimidation and physical force) is used. This distinction between: *a)* the physical aspects of safety in learning environments; and *b)* the systemic issues and practices that violate children's rights; helps to better identify the root causes that make school environments unsafe for all children. It is therefore only possible for all children to have access to education and have meaningful participation if inclusivity is promoted in classrooms. All children should feel safe to learn regardless of differences in social, economic and cultural backgrounds, especially children who have gone through crisis and trauma. Many students may suffer crisis and trauma in silence, from domestic violence and unsafe environments at home, to situations and relationships that exacerbate emotional and mental health issues. This includes students facing direct and indirect discrimination and stigmatisation. Social dominance has inevitably created harmful and abusive cultural practices that have led to the normalisation of some of its worst forms, such as patriarchy, racism, institutional betrayal, classism, sexism and genderism, among others.

Feeling unsafe in a learning environment can be exhibited in various ways. While the natural learning behaviours and self-expression of some students can differ from what is expected and may even be

reflective of the following behaviours, students who feel unsafe may, in particular, present themselves as very timid and/or compliant, or may even be perceived as deliberately disruptive. Some students may be less vocal or may practise self-isolation, and so tend to prefer to work individually rather than in a group or as part of a pair. Moreover, an unsafe learning environment is not limited to physical security issues. Some students who are very expressive, effeminate or opinionated may face biases and prejudices, which will make them feel unsafe. Numerous research reveal a number of **factors that threaten students' safety and influence** whether or not they feel included in their learning environments.⁴ These factors are:

- Bullying by teachers and peers (including physical, verbal, non-verbal and cyberbullying; resulting in isolation, alienation, targeting, ostracisation, etc.)
- Sexual harassment and assault
- Unfair punishment
- Teacher misconduct
- Poor teacher-student relationships
- Discrimination and prejudice, including pedagogical approaches that discriminate
- Exclusion or isolation
- High academic pressure
- Cultural insensitivity

It is crucial for educators and education service officers to recognise and address signs, behaviours and attitudes that reflect biases and prejudices, as this helps create a safe and inclusive learning environment. If left unchecked, certain biases and prejudices may be normalised and lead to a "negative or exclusionary mindset".⁵ Without any doubt, there can be no safety for students without inclusivity as a core element of the pedagogical design, and this must be a key consideration as well in the development of policies, programmes and laws that affect students. That is why this policy brief highlights key challenges and corresponding policy recommendations in establishing safe and inclusive learning environments in Malaysian public schools, paying special attention to the root causes as to why students feel unsafe in schools.

² From an essay submitted by a student, written as part of the Perak Model United Nations 2025 event in Ipoh, 7–9 November 2025, conducted in collaboration with KRYSS Network.

³ Brenda Sautner, "Inclusive, Safe and Caring Schools: Connecting Factors," *Developmental Disabilities Bulletin* 36, no. 1–2 (2008): 135–67, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ828951.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid; Patty Towl and Sheryl A. Hemphill, *Safe, Supportive, and Inclusive Learning Environments for Young People in Crisis and Trauma: Plaiting the Rope* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), <https://books.google.com.my/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7AtpDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=safe+and+inclusive+learning+environment&ots=TsuSuo8mAm&sig=00ipbZpnQhaO-XLsaUBtA45imzA#v=onepage&q=safe%20and%20inclusive%20learning%20environment&f=false>; Justice for Sisters, KRYSS Network and SIS Forum, *Behind Classroom Walls: Unpacking Moral Policing in Malaysian Public Schools* (Malaysia: Justice for Sisters, 2025), <https://justiceforsisters.org/resources/behind-classroom-wallsunpacking-moral-policing-in-malaysian-public-schools>; KRYSS Network, *What Works, What Fails, What's Needed: Best Practices and Persistent Challenges in Creating Safe and Inclusive Malaysian Public Schools* (Petaling Jaya: KRYSS Network, 2026), <https://www.kryss.network/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/SILE-Research-Report.pdf>.

⁵ Towl and Hemphill, *Safe, Supportive, and Inclusive Learning Environments for Young People in Crisis and Trauma: Plaiting the Rope*.

2.0 Defining the Parameters of “Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments”

Inclusivity is more than treating everyone equally. It means acknowledging and understanding each other's differences, ensuring no one is left behind. I remember a boy with a stutter who found it difficult to communicate and present in class. Instead of dismissing his struggles, the teacher rearranged the layout of the classroom to ensure that not all eyes were on him, helping him calm his nerves and speak with fewer pauses. This small effort created a sense of unity in the classroom, where each person looked out for one another. This experience taught me that inclusivity not only empowers individuals, but strengthens the learning experience as a whole.

—Liyana Fatima Majid Hussain (student)⁶

The understanding of safe and inclusive learning environments can vary, depending on whose perspective and moral values are dominant. There needs to be non-negotiable standards for what helps foster and maintain safe, inclusive learning environments. What counts as “safe” often depends on who defines it. School administrators may prioritise orderly classrooms; students may prioritise freedom from humiliation; parents may focus on academic excellence to secure a better future for their children (resulting in academic pressure on them); and educators and education service officers may focus on workload, the school's reputation, and examination results. While the alignment of educators, education service officers, parents and students on this standard is crucial to ensuring that public learning environments can meet the needs of all students, **the competing priorities of all parties must be reconciled with student well-being as the non-negotiable centre.** Safe and inclusive learning environments may be best understood as the absence of harm in the following forms:

- a. Harms resulting from cultural practices, traditions, beliefs, and abuses of power and authority (including by acting outside of the scope of authority) that are imposed upon students. These harms often come about through dress code enforcement, gender segregation expectations, ethnic stereotyping, religious observance requirements, hierarchical adherence to traditions that silence student voices under the pretext of

“respect”, or caning justified as “cultural discipline”. They can then manifest in public shaming during spot-checks for “improper” attire, assumptions that certain ethnicities are “naturally” more or less academic, and expectations that students must silently accept adult authority without question.

- b. Harms caused by ignoring or neglecting students with different needs (ranging from physical disabilities to different learning and well-being needs, including privacy needs), or by dismissing these needs altogether; and
- c. Direct or indirect harms caused by poor top-down communication models between decision makers and practitioners (i.e., educators and education service officers), as well as poor top-down enforcement by the MOE on its own policies and in fulfilling its duties and obligations according to the law.

In order to be better able to establish safe and inclusive learning environments, the above-mentioned harms cannot be justifiable under any circumstances, and especially not because of a student's identity, including their self-identification and self-determination. In other words, **harms must be recognised as harms when perpetrated against students, and must be equally addressed no matter if the students are perceived as “good” or “bad”.**

⁶ KRYSS Network, *Safety through Inclusion: What Students Want*, zine (Petaling Jaya, 2026), p. 22.
https://www.kryss.network/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/SILE-Zine_eng.pdf (accessed 18 May 2026).
Quotes from the zine have been edited for clarity and conciseness.

3.0 Identified Root Causes for Students Feeling Unsafe

3.1 Lack of Student-Centric Approaches and Practices

The “best interest of the child” is a legal principle that is often cited to ensure that a child’s safety, well-being, and development are prioritised over parental rights in decisions like custody, adoption and care. It focuses on emotional and physical safety, the child’s views, stability and care history. However, in practice, the “best interest of the child” in relation to educational concerns in Malaysian public schools often neglects a key component: the child’s views and lived experiences. In establishing safe and inclusive learning environments, students’ perspectives, needs and lived realities must be considered in the design of programmes and initiatives, from the pedagogical approaches adopted to the initiatives implemented for students’ personal growth and development. This means that all policies, programmes and initiatives must also be monitored and evaluated based on student-centric outcomes, and that student involvement and their substantive representation must be central in mechanisms of accountability. Student-centric approaches require structural changes, including student representatives with voting power on school disciplinary committees, mandatory student feedback in teacher evaluations, student-led safety audits of school facilities, and complaint mechanisms that do not route through the same adults that are being complained about. There is a need to instill student-centric values that are not premised on the tradition of “we, the adults, know best”.

3.2 Lack of Initiatives to Prevent and Address Prejudices and Biases

While research has shown that there are some initiatives to address prevalent prejudices and biases in students (albeit inconsistent in their implementation), there appears to be a lack of initiatives to prevent and address prejudices and biases in educators, education service officers, school authorities and MOE officials. Initiatives to increase

understanding of different cultures and traditions, and to facilitate exposure to, deeper understanding of, and appreciation for socio-economic and universal human rights issues, should not only be encouraged but made integral to the educational syllabus.

3.3 Abuse of Student Disciplinary Practices

“Discipline must come through liberty.... We do not consider an individual disciplined only when he has been rendered as artificially silent as a mute and as immovable as a paralytic. He is an individual annihilated, not disciplined.”

—Maria Montessori⁷

Discipline is an integral part of the education system. It refers to a set of rules and regulations designed to maintain order, ensure safety and promote learning within schools. Discipline is not a goal unto itself. The main role of discipline is to ensure that students develop self-awareness and self-control, are able to decide for themselves and take full responsibility for their decisions and actions, develop healthy relationships with diverse individuals and groups, have the skills to negotiate behaviours (including recognising and stopping unwanted behaviours) and are able to see a variety of perspectives and empathise with others’ points of view, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. However, most educators in Malaysian public schools approach discipline as if it is synonymous with punishment. In practice, Malaysian school discipline often achieves the opposite of its proper role: students learn to avoid punishment rather than develop self-control; they comply externally while resenting internally; they fear and distrust authority, rather than respect it and see it as a reliable source of support. Positive incentives, inclusive pedagogical teaching methods and positive reinforcements are oftentimes sidelined or completely abandoned.

While some argue that strict discipline policies are necessary for maintaining a productive learning environment, others contend that such policies can be counterproductive and hinder student development. For example, moral policing camouflaged as disciplinary action can and has amounted to abuse, some of which include the following:

⁷ Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method: Scientific Pedagogy as Applied Child Education in “the Children’s Houses”*, With Additions and Revisions by the Author., 1912, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/montessori/method/method.html> (accessed May 18, 2026).

- The 16 January 2026 case in Tawau, where a teacher bullied students by cutting their headscarves (tudung). The MOE has confirmed the incident.⁸
- School authorities making up false disciplinary action claims against student whistleblowers. A High Court injunction has confirmed the incident.⁹
- A teacher who beat a Year 2 student in "retaliation" for not being in their seat. No criminal charges were filed, but an amount of RM85,000 in civil damages against the teacher was confirmed by the Court.¹⁰

Moral policing enforces a specific, often narrow, cultural or social code. It typically manifests as actions taken by individuals or groups to impose their personal moral standards on others, often through coercion, intimidation or public shaming. Moral policing invites situations where beliefs and practices or traditions become harmful because they are imposed upon students, resulting in imposed behaviour that is superficial and performative, or even externalised behaviour.¹¹ The focus of moral policing is on controlling others' actions, dressing or social interactions based on personal beliefs. It often involves interference in personal liberty, and infringement upon privacy and individual rights. While discipline should be constructive and developmental, moral policing is restrictive and often punitive. Striking a balance between enforcing discipline and fostering growth and development requires careful consideration from educators, along with the necessary training and skill development at all levels.

3.4 Lack of Independent Accountability and Enforcement Mechanisms

The lack of power to ensure accountability, and to enforce policy and law, is rooted in the challenges of addressing cover-ups by actors within the public education sector. Efforts to cover up wrongdoings surface especially when whistleblowers come forward.

Accountability failures manifest in several ways:

- **Cover-ups:** Schools prioritise reputation over student safety. Educators and education service officers accused of misconduct are quietly transferred rather than investigated.
- **Whistleblower retaliation:** Students and teachers who report misconduct face harassment.
- **Circular complaint mechanisms:** A student reporting an educator or education service officer must go through the school administration, who may protect their colleague. There is no independent external pathway.
- **No professional oversight:** Unlike doctors (Medical Council) or lawyers (Bar Council), educators and education service officers have no independent professional body with power to investigate misconduct and revoke licences.

⁸"Guru Didakwa Gantung Tudung Pelajar Dipindahkan ke Sekolah Lain—Pengarah Pendidikan Negeri," *Sinar Harian*, January 19, 2026, <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/764609/berita/semasa/guru-didakwa-gunting-tudung-pelajar-dipindahkan-ke-sekolah-lain---pengarah-pendidikan-negeri>.

⁹"The 2020 High Court Judgment," *Tiada.Guru*, April 26, 2024, <https://slides.com/tg-campaign/2020-high-court-judgement>. See slide 7.

¹⁰"Shah Alam High Court Orders Ex-Teacher to Pay RM85,000 for Assaulting Student with Broom at Selayang School," *The Malay Mail*, October 11, 2024, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/10/11/shah-alam-high-court-orders-ex-teacher-to-pay-rm85000-for-assaulting-student-with-broomstick-at-selayang-school/153280>.

¹¹"Ask a Psychologist: Differences Between Internalising and Externalising Behaviours in Children, and Psychological Management," *Inner Eastern Psychology*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.innereasternpsychology.com.au/resources/internalising-vs-externalising-behaviours-whats-the-difference>. Externalised behaviour refers to maladaptive actions directed outwardly, often manifesting as aggression, defiance, or other disruptive behaviors that can interfere with an individual's functioning in society.

4.0 Identified Best Practices in Malaysian Public Schools

KRYSS Network's research with further feedback from the Tiada.Guru Campaign and Pride in Research have identified best practices that exist in Malaysian public schools to foster safe and inclusive learning environments.¹² However, these best practices have been found to be implemented in an inconsistent manner because they are largely individually-driven by teachers or by a specific school, and are also reliant on good teacher-student relationships. These best practices include:

Provision of Accountable and External Independent Expertise: This mainly manifested as the implementation of anti-bullying campaigns and initiatives that go beyond slogans or occasional reminders during assemblies. In a school in Sabah, for instance, concrete action was taken through the placement of police officers, known as Pegawai Perhubungan Sekolah, who directly assist in handling cases involving student violence. This initiative is especially valuable, as some bullying cases extend beyond what teachers can manage—not necessarily due to a lack of capability, but often because they are understaffed or overburdened. This measure points to the recognition that teachers should not have to play multiple roles requiring different skillsets or expertise that may lie beyond their scope of work and responsibilities. Additional support becomes essential when the expertise lies in other professions, such as for addressing mental health issues or violent behaviour (e.g., gangsterism among students).

Collaborative Approach to Addressing Issues and Managing Students: Anti-bullying policies are actively enforced, with the disciplinary unit and teachers working together to address cases of bullying and sexual harassment. This reflects effective collaboration between teaching staff and a dedicated unit to tackle serious issues in schools. Parents are frequently involved in student concerns, including bullying incidents, and are called to the school to discuss issues like racism and discrimination. However, in practice, next steps have proven to be difficult to pin down. Parents and teachers could unite to develop activities that benefit the students, taking into consideration students' inputs, and students should be encouraged to submit proposals to the school administration for relevant

programmes (see also section 3.1 for student-centric approaches).

Clear and Effective Communication Protocols that Uphold Integrity and Students' Privacy and Safety: These helped ensure that students feel comfortable communicating when they feel unsafe. However, such instances were found to be reliant on good teacher-student relationships rather than on official communication protocols.

Diversifying Pedagogical Approaches, and Educational Materials and Tools, Based on Students' Learning Needs: More attention is likely to be required by students with special needs beyond teaching styles, including (but not limited to) diversified materials or worksheets, and teaching assistants to further aid special needs students. Whether students with special needs are integrated or segregated into a dedicated class would depend on the school's access to resources. Simultaneously, there is a need to recognise that teachers should not be overburdened with multiple roles when it comes to implementing additional aid for special needs students.

Promoting Inclusivity and Advance Appreciation of Diversity and Inclusivity: Research participants highlighted the celebration of various cultural festivals and events as a good practice within their school, noting that it provides students with opportunities to learn about different cultures and beliefs, hence promoting mutual understanding. Parents should also be invited to participate in these celebrations, in order for there to be a collective effort to promote diversity and inclusivity. Schools should encourage students to embrace differences and to respect one another, such as with sensitivity training and interfaith talks to help uphold diversity and inclusivity.

Abandoning Corporal Punishment as a Disciplinary Measure: There were teachers who observed that corporal punishment appeared ineffective in addressing problematic behaviour among students, and this observation is, in fact, supported by over 50 years of research.¹³ It has no positive effects and causes severe negative consequences, including impaired cognitive development, mental health issues (e.g., anxiety and depression), and increased aggression. It violates children's rights to physical integrity and dignity, and is ineffective as a disciplinary tool, often escalating to abuse.¹⁴

¹² KRYSS Network, *What Works, What Fails, What's Needed: Best Practices and Persistent Challenges in Creating Safe and Inclusive Malaysian Public Schools*.

¹³ Amalina Annuar and Muhammad Khairil Rumaling, "Behind the Cane: A Systematic Review of Corporal Punishment Among Children in Malaysia," *Malaysian Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 31, no. S1 (July 9, 2025): 42–53, <https://doi.org/10.51407/mjpc.v31is1.362>; Jude Toyat, "Educational Caning Still Allowed in Schools, Says Education Ministry Officer," *The Borneo Post*, October 17, 2025, <https://www.theborneopost.com/2025/10/17/educational-caning-still-allowed-in-schools-says-education-ministry-officer/>; End Corporal Punishment, *Corporal Punishment of Children in Malaysia* (Geneva: Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2024), <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/wp-content/uploads/country-reports/Malaysia.pdf>; World Health Organization, *Corporal Punishment of Children: The Public Health Impact* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2025), <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/publications/i/item/B09424>.

¹⁴ "Corporal Punishment of Children and Health," World Health Organization, May 11, 2026, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/corporal-punishment-and-health>.

Respecting Students, Their Privacy and Their Personal Boundaries, and Ensuring Fully-Informed Consent:

Violations of students' right to privacy by educators and education service officers are yet to be considered disciplinary violations. Although students' mobile phones (considered as their personal devices) may be confiscated, educators and education service officers should refrain from going through the phones, as doing so would be considered inappropriate and a violation of students' right to privacy. Schools must adhere to obtaining parental consent regarding all matters related to students' exposure, including photography rights in accordance with MOE guidelines for parental consent. Students' personal devices should only be checked by the police for evidence of criminal offences (e.g., violence or threats of violence), and only when a police report is filed and the case remains an open investigation.¹⁵

Peer Mentoring: This involves a person (the mentor) supporting someone who has less experience in any given area, or who requires guidance and support (the mentee).

Supportive Learning Environment: Schools can show care for the well-being of students and their families. One example given during the KRYSS Network research was fundraising efforts in the event that a family member of a student or school member passes away, or is in need of emergency surgery.

By comparing student-validated effective practices against ineffective ones, the KRYSS Network research reveals common **success factors**:

- **Specificity over generality:** Effective practices to respond to actual incidents (e.g., sensitivity training after a student is mocked) rather than deploying generic messaging that "bullying is bad".
- **Action, not just awareness:** Student-validated practices that create tangible change (e.g., perpetrator consequences, victim support, policy changes, etc.).
- **Active and genuine student participation:** Practices that incorporate students' input in a genuine manner.
- **Teacher buy-in:** Practices failed when teachers were not genuinely committed to bringing about "safer and more inclusive learning environments", regardless of the MOE's official policy.
- **Tackle the root of the problem, not the symptoms:** Programmes tackling underlying prejudice (e.g., colourism awareness and racism workshops) prevented future incidents while purely punitive responses did not.

¹⁵Zaid Malek, "Why Police Phone Checks in Malaysian Schools May Be Unconstitutional," *Aliran*, November 3, 2025, <https://m.aliran.com/civil-society-voices/why-police-phone-checks-in-malaysian-schools-may-be-unconstitutional>; Aira Jailani, "PDRM Authorised to Inspect Mobile Phones Without Warrant on Suspicion of Criminal Activity," *Gempak*, January 14, 2025, <https://gempak.com/rojakdaily/news/pdrm-authorised-inspect-mobile-phones-out-warrant-suspicion-criminal-activity-95116>.

5.0 Policy Implications

“The Ministry is promoting greater unity among students by encouraging more interaction between students from a range of socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, thus giving them the opportunity to learn to understand, accept and embrace differences. The Ministry is also focused on developing a better understanding of the current levels of unity, which will then enable the Ministry to identify key support areas to deploy appropriate interventions.”

—Ministry of Education¹⁶

For the MOE, unity appears to be a key instrument in achieving a truly **inclusive** learning environment. This instrument consists of three areas, namely “Accepting Diversity”, “Respecting Diversity” and “Managing Diversity”. The instrument also speaks to ten values, which are tolerance, openness, cooperation, trust, politeness, appreciation, care (for others), fairness, trustworthiness and rationality. This reflects a good and expanded understanding of students’ safety in schools, and how necessary inclusivity and the acceptance of diversity is in establishing safe and inclusive learning environments in Malaysian public schools.

For the MOE, assessing the extent of unity among students and teachers is crucial in identifying how they accept, respect and manage differences among each other. Unity can be categorised as an indicator of inclusivity in schools, particularly considering Malaysia’s multicultural constructs. The following chart in figure 1 explains the Concept of Unity as identified by the MOE in accepting, respecting and managing diversity:



Figure 1: How accepting, respecting and managing diversity play a role in the concept of unity.
(Source: Education Planning and Research Division, 2013.
Reproduced from *Malaysia Education Blueprint: Annual Report 2013*.)

To measure the level of unity among teachers and students, the Unity Index Measurement Survey was introduced in 2014.¹⁷ The baseline for this survey was derived from a pilot study of the Concept of Unity instrument, which studied 136 primary schools as well as 175 secondary schools, including 4,467 teachers and 4,639 students. From this baseline study, it was found that unity was at a **medium** level across all ten values (classified according to figure 2 below). From the findings for students, the highest level of unity was on Respecting Diversity, while the lowest level was on Accepting Diversity. The findings for teachers, on the other hand, indicated that the highest level of unity was in the area of Managing Diversity, with the lowest level being in the area of Accepting Diversity. For both teachers and students, Accepting Diversity appears to be a challenge, and yet, based on the chart by the MOE (see figure 1), it is the essential first step to respecting and managing diversity.

To further interrogate the inconsistency in these levels of unity among students and teachers, it is necessary to get the details of the survey based on the ten values (which were not made available with the findings released) as the inconsistency suggests that the highest level of unity among teachers in the area of Managing Diversity may not necessarily be about acceptance, but about conformity or assimilation. Similarly for students, politeness and appreciation under Respecting Diversity need not necessarily translate to care for and trust in others who are different.

¹⁶Ministry of Education Malaysia, *Malaysia Education Blueprint: Annual Report 2013*, government report, Putrajaya: Federal Government Administrative Centre, 2014, <https://www.moe.gov.my/storage/files/shares/Dasar/PPPM/MEB%20Annual%20Report%202013.pdf> (accessed January 21, 2026).

¹⁷Ministry of Education Malaysia, *Malaysia Education Blueprint: Annual Report 2014*, government report, Putrajaya: Federal Government Administrative Centre, 2015, <https://www.moe.gov.my/storage/files/shares/Dasar/PPPM/MEB%20Annual%20Report%202014.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2026).

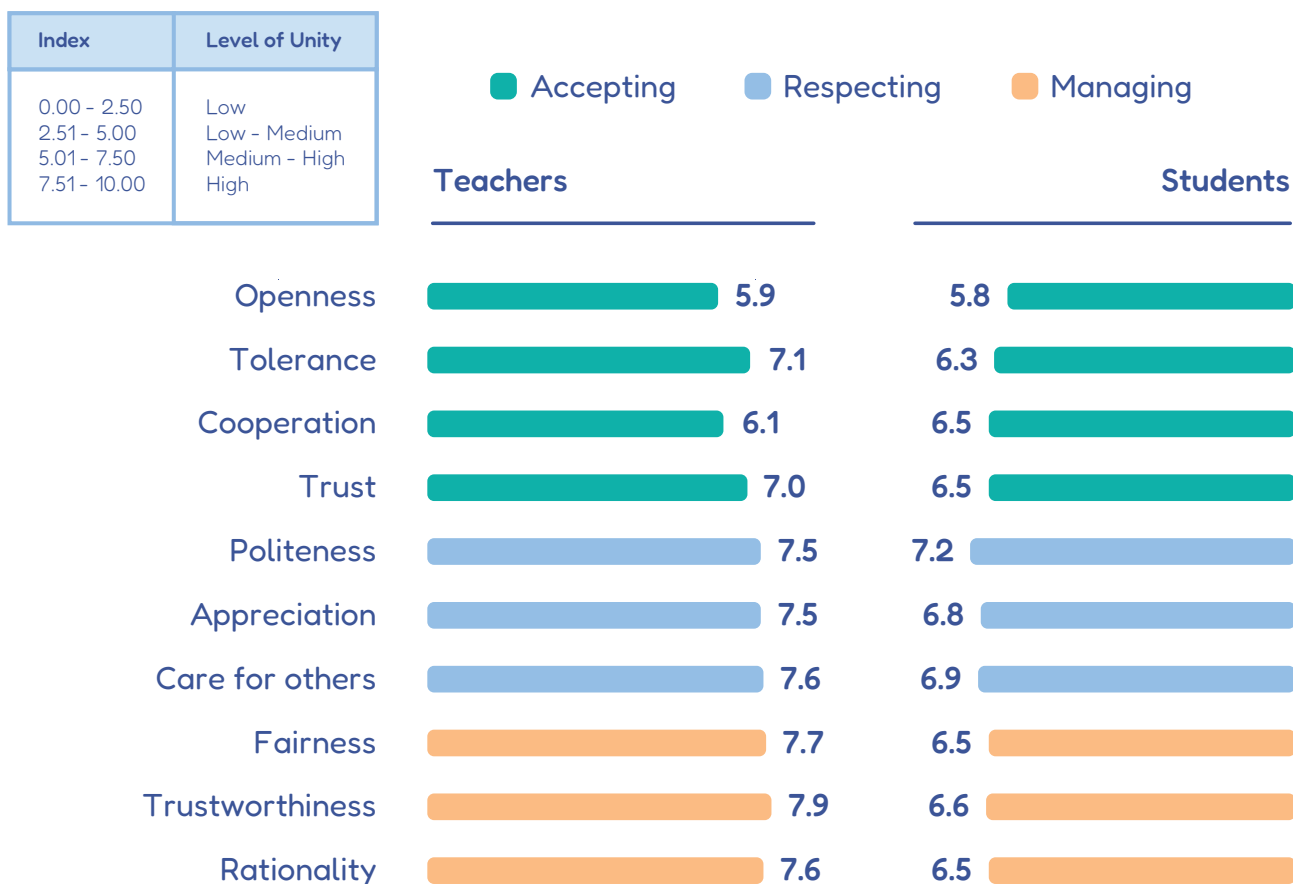


Figure 2: Unity Index classification according to ten values.
 (Source: Education Planning and Research Division.
 Reproduced from *Malaysia Education Blueprint: Annual Report 2014*).

In 2023, the MOE released a decade-long comparison of the results from the Unity Index Measurement Survey, conducted between 2014 and 2023.¹⁸ The results indicated that there was a drop in the Unity Index score from 2014 (6.8) to 2018 (5.4), but this has then been on an increasing trend from 6.2 in 2020 to 7.1 in 2022, reaching a new high of 7.5 in 2023 (see figure 3). This shows an improvement in unity levels among teachers and students. However, again, these results were not further broken down according to the ten values mentioned earlier, which was done in 2014 for the baseline (see figure 2).

With regards to the comparative Unity Index between primary and secondary school teachers and students, it is seen that secondary school teachers recorded the highest level of unity (8.28), followed by primary school teachers (8.24). Students at both levels of schooling performed significantly lower with secondary school students scoring a 6.96 out of 10 in unity, and the lowest being primary school students with a unity score of 6.56 (see figure 4).

¹⁸Ministry of Education Malaysia, *Malaysia Education Blueprint: Annual Report 2023*, government report, Putrajaya: Federal Government Administrative Centre, 2024, <https://www.moe.gov.my/storage/files/shares/Dasar/PPPM/PPPM%20Laporan%20Tahunan%202023%20%28BI%29.pdf> (accessed January 21, 2026).

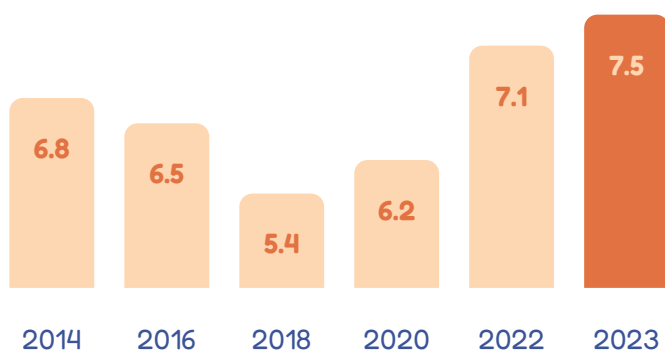


Figure 3: Unity Index trend in MOE schools, 2014–2023.
(Source: Education Policy Planning and Research Division.
Reproduced from *Malaysia Education Blueprint: Annual Report 2023*.)

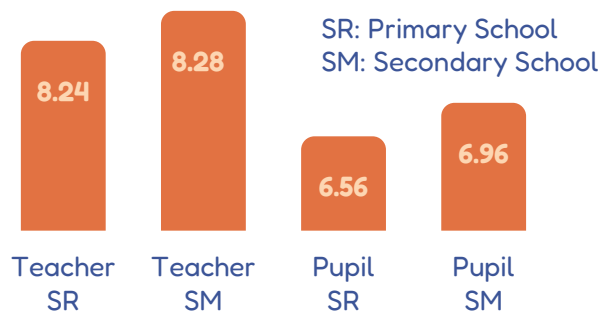


Figure 4: Unity Index levels of teachers and pupils according to school levels.
(Source: Education Policy Planning and Research Division.
Reproduced from *Malaysia Education Blueprint: Annual Report 2023*.)

The incongruence in data between figures 3 and 4, especially when the more detailed baseline data of 2014 is taken into account, raises the question of whether or not the unity measurements for teachers are only measured among teachers, and similarly for students—thus, neglecting the measurement of teachers' acceptance, respect and/or management of students' diversity and vice versa. There is also the possibility that the teachers and students surveyed were largely from one ethnicity. If such is the case, it raises another question: had these figures been adjusted to properly reflect the fact? Without adjustment, the unity measurement would skew the Unity Index to show improvement that would not be reflected when the data is disaggregated.

The inconsistencies in MOE's findings on unity correspond to KRYSS Network's research, where as high as 50.4% of the 391 students surveyed felt socially excluded and suffered from friendship issues, and 13.4% cited language or cultural barriers while another 6.4% cited economic or material differences.¹⁹ This suggests that, among students, the manifestation of feelings of being unsafe is largely rooted in the lack of acceptance of diversity.

There have also been concerns regarding the *Rancangan Integrasi Murid Untuk Perpaduan*, a programme under which students from mainly Malay primary schools and students from non-Malay primary schools participate in joint activities, with the aim of improving ethnic relations and developing national integration. Concerns expressed include implementation periods that are too short, and a lack of commitment in implementation, which therefore calls for such programmes to be run in a more targeted, effective way that is tailored to better develop a sense of unity and inclusivity within the education ecosystem.²⁰

This inconsistency in implementation of best practices, along with the lack of frequency in implementation and time available to dedicate to such good initiatives, appears to be a common observance among both teachers and students. Both teachers and students have also expressed the need for the MOE's initiatives to be completely student-centric in design, implementation and enforcement, and in the monitoring and evaluating of outcomes. For example, surveys for students should be designed to take into account differing comprehension capacities in different age groups, thus ensuring ease of understanding when elaborating on issues, challenges and other factors.

¹⁹ KRYSS Network, *What Works, What Fails, What's Needed: Best Practices and Persistent Challenges in Creating Safe and Inclusive Malaysian Public Schools*.

²⁰ Faida Rahim, "RIMUP Gagal Tepati Tujuan Asal—Dr Anuar," *Astro Awani*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/rimup-gagal-tepati-tujuan-asal-dr-anuar-425793>.

6.0 Policy Alternatives

The following policy alternatives are recommended to complement existing policies rather than replace them. They offer different approaches to address specific challenges within the education system, while still aligning with the broader Malaysian educational goals.

6.1 Improve Pre-Service and In-Service Training, and Integrate Bias Training Into Teacher Certification

Educators must be well trained with the necessary skills to address and provide adequate responses to the overwhelming issues of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault in Malaysian public schools. Educators must go through a pre-service and in-service training in order to produce educators who are always sensitive, caring and professional in curbing serious issues such as sexual crimes among students.²¹ These trainings (including in-service training) should be conducted outside of classroom hours and with dedicated time allowance for teachers to attend without being continuously burdened with teaching requirements and other work-related matters. All pre-service teachers must complete a forty-hour module on recognising personal biases and inclusive classroom practices. In-service teachers must complete eight hours annually. Training should include Malaysian case studies of discrimination, self-assessment tools, observed classroom practice assessments (not just written tests), and follow-up accountability. Considering that there have been instances where teachers dismissed students' concerns or complaints, this training is meant to ensure that teachers put the well-being of victims and survivors first, by having the sensitivity and understanding required to act firmly to protect children in their learning environments.

6.2 Establish Multi-Disciplinary Teams Within Schools

Teachers are already overwhelmed with many demands and do not necessarily have the skills, knowledge, experience or expertise to address all issues suffered by students that arise from bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault. This includes teachers' own inability to check their biases and prejudices, which can result in harsh judgments that perpetuate a variety of harms towards students. Teachers need a team of professionals and/or a

Public Ombudsman to support them in addressing some of the more severe issues of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

6.3 Raise Awareness and Reinforce Gender Sensitivity Training

Raising awareness about gender stereotypes, promoting gender-inclusive language, and challenging discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, all need to be ongoing processes with regular sensitivity training.²² One-off training programmes will not change harmful and discriminatory behaviours and attitudes. Gender-sensitive consciousness will only come about effectively if there is change in the culture and practices within the school.

6.4 Empower Students

Students should be encouraged to become active proponents of inclusivity. This is crucial for creating a respectful and equitable learning environment. Encouraging the formation of student-led diversity and inclusion clubs, as envisioned in Article 15 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), can provide a platform for students to celebrate diversity, challenge prejudice, and foster a sense of belonging.²³ These clubs can organise events, conduct workshops, and initiate dialogues that promote understanding and respect among students from diverse backgrounds. Students should also be empowered to conduct policy dialogues with school authorities on ensuring safe and inclusive learning environments. Roles could include providing feedback on the effectiveness of complaint mechanisms in schools, and on policies—such as whether they work or do not work, whether they are implemented well and consistently, etc. Key initiatives that should be supported include:

- Peer mediation programmes which, guided by the UNCRC's emphasis on child participation and empowerment, can equip students with conflict-resolution skills, enabling them to address instances of discrimination or bullying effectively. By training students in conflict resolution and peer mediation, schools can create a more positive and inclusive school climate where conflicts are addressed constructively and respectfully.
- Fostering interfaith dialogue and understanding within Malaysian schools.

²¹ Maszlee Malik, "Making Our Schools a Safer Place: a Proposal from an Ex-MOE," *The Malay Mail*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/what-you-think/2021/05/20/making-our-schools-a-safer-place-a-proposal-from-an-ex-moe-maszlee-malik/1975557>.

²² Puteri Ayufiza Asmuni, "Reinforcement of Gender Stereotyping in Malaysian Primary English Textbooks," *Arab World English Journal* 14, no. 3 (September 15, 2023): 66–86, <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol14no3.5>.

²³ Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, *Status Report on Child Rights in Malaysia 2019*, report (Petaling Jaya: Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2020), <https://wao.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CRCM-STATUS-REPORT-2019-FINAL.pdf>.

7.0 Policy Recommendations

"We must advocate for systems that protect and empower every learner. Whether through student-led initiatives, inclusive curricula, or mental health support programmes, every effort counts. Ultimately, a safe and inclusive learning environment is not merely about preventing harm; it is about nurturing hope. It is about creating classrooms where no child grows up believing they must change themselves in order to be accepted. When every learner feels safe to be authentic, education fulfills its highest purpose: not only to cultivate intelligent minds, but to nurture compassionate hearts."

—Khoirul Aishah binti Hashan Sarker (student)²⁴

The following policy recommendations have been curated from the perspectives and lived experiences of students and teachers who participated in the research by KRYSS Network, thereby giving weight to the importance of meeting the needs of both groups of individuals.²⁵

7.1 Establish Clear, Non-Arbitrary Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

Responses from teachers indicate a lack of awareness among teachers on the MOE's guidelines and directives (e.g., demonstrated by their acts of following their students and posting pictures of them on social media without written consent from the student concerned or their parents). Especially in the era of social media, some teachers can be seen creating online content with their students, gaining hundreds of thousands of views and engagement. This can expose students to numerous risks, such as online predators. There is also a need to review the guidelines on discipline, and the MOE has to set clear SOPs to handle cases in schools that create an unsafe school environment. The SOPs should be considered a living Code of Ethics, regularly reviewed and accompanied with step-by-step actions for implementation and enforcement. The SOPs have to be detailed and well-communicated to all teachers and school staff, and not just released via a surat pekeliling without proper monitoring of its execution. Educators and education service officers, including administrative authorities (i.e., Ketua Bidang and above), should undergo certification for their comprehension of the SOPs and be bound for vicarious

liability if violations are not promptly and fully reported.

7.2 Make Background Checks Mandatory

There were some cases mentioned by students, as well as others that can be seen online, where teachers and school staff were outright racist, judgmental and—in worst-case scenarios—had behavioural tendencies towards children and criminal cases in their records.²⁶ This calls for a requirement for detailed background checks on teachers, sports coaches, volunteers, teaching assistants, guards, canteen workers and others during the hiring process, as suggested by former Education Minister, Maszlee Malik.²⁷

7.3 Decentralise Power and Decision-Making Within Local Multistakeholder and Multi-Disciplinary Teams

The rationale behind decentralising power is that local stakeholders and schools understand the needs of local communities and students better, which makes them better at deciding how to allocate budget and resources to best benefit their students. Decentralisation of power involves student-centric approaches and substantive student involvement (as elaborated in section 3.1), along with transferring decision-making power to the district and school levels, a practice that has been done by other countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada and Australia.²⁸

²⁴ KRYSS Network, *Safety through Inclusion: What Students Want*, pp. 20–21. Quotes from the zine have been rephrased for clarity and conciseness.

²⁵ KRYSS Network, *What Works, What Fails, What's Needed: Best Practices and Persistent Challenges in Creating Safe and Inclusive Malaysian Public Schools*.

²⁶ "The 17-Year-Old Exposing Rape Culture in Malaysian Schools," *Al Jazeera*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/19/the-17-year-old-exposing-rape-culture-in-malaysian-schools>. An example of such an online case was a post made on the Facebook account of student Ain Husniza's school principal, calling her a "child of Satan".

²⁷ Malik, "Making Our Schools a Safer Place: a Proposal from an Ex-MOE."

²⁸ OECD, "How Decentralised Are Education Systems, and What Does It Mean for Schools?," policy brief, *Education Indicators in Focus*, no. 64 (2018), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2018/11/how-decentralised-are-education-systems-and-what-does-it-mean-for-schools_7c1806fc/e14575d5-en.pdf.

In the context of Malaysia, the transfer of power can be done gradually, where training should be provided to school heads as they are already in charge of school management, and can thereby ensure the connection between teachers, parents and higher levels of the education system. This training is to ensure that the school heads are well-adapted to shoulder their expanded responsibilities with clear vision, framework and mechanisms in place. In order to ensure that this power is not abused and that transparency, integrity and accountability can be upheld, the best-practice approach of having a multi-disciplinary and multistakeholder team would be critical as a decision-making mechanism. This decentralisation of power, however, does not mean a reinforcement of power hierarchies. Its effective implementation hinges on the following critical questions:

- When parents are “called to school” to discuss student issues, who sets the agenda? Are parents genuinely partners, or are they summoned subordinates?
- Do students have actual decision-making power on “Safe School Teams”, or are they token representatives?
- When schools involve parents in cyberbullying cases, whose perspective dominates?

True collaboration should be shared power, not merely a consultation or the provision of information, and those identified as stakeholders must have students’ best interests at heart. A student-centred collaborative approach should be adopted in identifying stakeholders whom students trust to advocate for their rights. Students should be able to choose who sits at the table with them for cases of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault. These could be parents, but could also be counsellors, social workers, civil society organisational representatives, older siblings or community members. For criminal cases, the inclusion of legally-trained professionals should be mandatory, but the choice of who sits at the table should remain with the student. The necessary time should be provided to the affected student(s) to speak with the different stakeholders and feel comfortable with them. For general school governance (e.g., budgets, Persatuan Ibubapa dan Guru programme, etc.), parents can and should participate. Accountability must be upheld if students’ input is ignored, and students, in particular, should

have veto power over decisions that can affect them negatively or add more harm.

7.4 Ensure Transparency in MOE Study Findings and Reporting of Bullying, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault

Too often, schools are accused of trying to cover up the issues and problems that arise.²⁹ Making study findings and reports public will help to increase public trust in both the MOE and the schools concerned. Such transparency will help lay the foundation for conversations and encourage the political will to address the issues effectively. Studies by the MOE, however, have to adopt a rigorous research methodology and be clearly articulated in the report, so that they can be interrogated by external parties. Research findings should be audited by independent third-party experts (following the example of organisations and programmes like the OECD and PISA). The MOE could also allow for international agencies to conduct their studies, similar to what was done for the United Nations Development Programme’s SDG16 Survey Initiative, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys by the United Nations Children’s Fund, the OECD PISA Global Competence Framework, etc.

7.5 Adopt Student-Centric Pedagogical Approaches

Drawing from international examples, best-practice pedagogical approaches should promote students’ positive self-image and belief in themselves, as well as individualised (yet guided) learning achievements. This will mean optimising existing resources and conducting audits to ensure that school budgets are expended based on students’ needs (see also section 3.1).

7.6 Mandatory Reporting of Misconduct, and Independent, Wide-Ranging Whistleblower Protection

The harassment of whistleblowers is a harsh reality in the public education sector. The threats against Ain Husniza, the three Sabahan teenagers that became High Court plaintiffs and MOE whistleblower teacher Nurhaizah Ejab, are just a few examples.³⁰ Students, teachers and parents who report educator misconduct must be heard, accepted, and also provided critical physical protection and mental-emotional support by qualified independent external parties, not the MOE.³¹

²⁹ “Don’t Cover up Bullying, Schools Told,” *The Star Online*, January 3, 2025.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/01/03/dont-cover-up-bullying-schools-told>

Margarita Peredaryenko and Avice Heng, “From Outrage to Action: Closing Malaysia’s Loopholes on School Bullying,” *Business Today*, August 16, 2025.

<https://www.businesstoday.com.my/2025/08/16/from-outrage-to-action-closing-malaysias-loopholes-on-school-bullying>.

³⁰ Hadi Azmi, “Malaysian Teen Threatened for Revealing Her Teacher Joked About Rape,” *Benar News*, May 6, 2025.

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/my-teen-rape-threat-05062021170623.html>

Cynthia D. Baga, “For Raising Issue of Teacher Not Attending Class for Months: ‘Ex-Teacher Tells of Death Threats,’” *The Daily Express*, November 25, 2022.

<https://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/203267/for-raising-issue-of-teacher-not-attending-class-for-months-ex-teacher-tells-of-death-threats>

Jason Santos, “Students Who Sued Their Teacher for Skipping Classes to Get Day in Court,” *The Vibes*, September 2, 2022.

<https://www.thevibes.com/articles/education/70330/students-who-sued-their-teacher-for-skipping-classes-to-get-day-in-court>.

³¹ Desmond Davidson, “TI-M Gesa KPM Lindungi Guru Pemberi Maklumat,” *The Malaysian Insight*, July 26, 2023.

<https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/bahasa/s/454113>.

Disturbingly, the current MOE whistleblower protection policy excludes all disciplinary, civil and/or criminal witnesses from applying for whistleblower protection. This creates an unreasonable catch-22 situation where school-based witnesses are forced to choose: to testify in any proceeding brought by survivors, or to maintain their whistleblower protection. Without whistleblowers feeling safe to even report cases, it will be impossible to determine the true reality on the ground. Therefore, the MOE needs to make it mandatory for misconduct and disciplinary incidents (whether perpetrated by a teacher or another student) to be reported not only to the school and MOE, but also to the parents with an enforceable deadline. Any disciplinary action taken by an educator or education service officer must be reported to parents.

7.7 Mainstream and Standardise Best Practices in All Schools

Both teachers and students have shared that some of the best practices they have identified were teacher-initiated. In fact, most best practices depended on exceptional individual teachers rather than systemic policy—examples from KRYSS Network's research were numerous, including an Orang Asli school teacher who developed diversified pedagogical approaches, a coach who addressed exclusion, and a headmaster who reminded teaching staff about consent. While these are laudable, personality-driven initiatives only mean that ensuring safer and inclusive schools will depend a lot on the educators and education service officers to whom students have access. Personality-driven initiatives are not sustainable as exceptional teachers can leave, transfer or burn out. The celebration of the “teacher hero” can also mask systemic failures within public schools, allowing the MOE to avoid addressing why best practices (despite being known) are yet to be standardised effectively. There must be institutional support so that all educators and education service officers can innovate towards ensuring safer and more inclusive learning environments.

All students should have equal right to safe and inclusive learning environments. Therefore, the extent to which students get to enjoy safer and more inclusive learning environments should not be personality-driven, but quality-driven, and hence should be ensured by the MOE. This means that the appreciation of socioeconomic and universal human rights should not only be encouraged, but be made integral to the education syllabus. This also leads to the issue of funding for public schools. The MOE

should conduct a mandatory resource audit to determine the following:

- What is the minimum staffing ratio needed for safe and inclusive education?
- What does comprehensive teacher training cost, considering the gaps in capabilities and attitudes identified by both teachers and students?
- What infrastructure investments are needed to address the accessibility issues identified by both students and teachers?
- How much would it cost to implement all best practices systemically and ensure that their effectiveness is measured by students' safety and inclusivity outcomes?

7.8 Establish an Enforcement-Capable Public Ombudsman in Schools

When the perpetrator is a public servant, the paths to safety and justice can be significantly altered. Severe cases of misconduct by educators and/or school authorities can include cover-ups, inaction on credible reports of misconduct, fabrication of key evidence, harassment of witnesses and more. Several cases have been documented by the Tiada.Guru Campaign highlighting the severity of these issues that reek of non-accountability, along with the lack of transparency towards the Malaysian public.³⁴ In such cases, it is therefore necessary for an independent investigative and enforcement body to intervene.

A Public Ombudsman can provide independent whistleblower protection, investigate cases of misconduct either by report or by its own initiative, and take disciplinary, punitive, restorative or even legal action against officers. Most importantly, to avoid real or perceived conflict of interest, the Public Ombudsman must disallow former public servants, politicians and their family members as officers. Instead, it must be staffed by counsellors, child rights legal experts, social case workers and vetted community members. Its top officers should not be appointed by executive authority, such as the Prime Minister, but instead be elected by the people directly. To further firewall from executive interference, the Ombudsman's budget ought to be a direct percentage of the annual national budget. This will ensure that larger governments, which require commensurately wider and deeper oversight, would provide the Ombudsman sufficient resources to meet said requirements.

³² Amirul Aiman, “Review Whistleblower Policy to Widen Protection, Education Ministry Told,” *Free Malaysia Today*, July 28, 2023, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/07/28/review-whistleblower-policy-to-widen-protection-education-ministry-told>.

³³ KRYSS Network, *What Works, What Fails, What's Needed: Best Practices and Persistent Challenges in Creating Safe and Inclusive Malaysian Public Schools*.

³⁴ Ibid. See annex 3.

The proposed Public Ombudsman should contain a national unit for cases involving children and/or schools. This will allow each school to be directly monitored by stationed Ombudsman officers. Public Ombudsman officers at schools should not be school principals, educators, education service officers or other officials from the MOE, as Ombudsman officers should be a primary contact for severe cases of educator misconduct. They can also serve as an independent ally to assist students in reporting alleged crimes directly to the police and/or the MACC, without improper and illegal intervention by MOE officers.

The Public Ombudsman has the key benefit of being able to facilitate investigations (into misconduct or legal matters) to be conducted by independent experts, instead of the responsibility falling to educators whose core business is teaching.²⁵ The Public Ombudsman must be a Constitutional body outside the Executive Branch of the government, instead of within it. It should have transparent, regular reports of its actions, be subjected to strict

deadlines to conclude investigations (to ensure severe cases do not languish), be able to enforce decisions on actions to be taken resulting from investigations, and be audited by a body outside of the government.

8.0 Conclusion

The suggested policy alternatives and policy recommendations reflect the voices of both students and teachers, sharing a vision of what safe and inclusive learning environments should look like in Malaysian public schools. While recognising the good initiatives of the MOE, it is also important to acknowledge the gaps observed in implementation and enforcement, along with the resulting harmful outcomes of prejudices, biases, discrimination and stigmatisation. With these policy alternatives and policy recommendations in place, schools will truly be a safe place for students of all backgrounds to learn, thrive and reach their full potential.



²⁵ "Parliament Must Establish an Ombudsman for Schools," Tiada.Guru, November 12, 2025, <https://tiada.guru/updates/parliament-must-establish-an-ombudsman-for-schools-external-and-independent-enforcement-emancipation-from-moe>; "The Public Ombudsman, a Summary: Make Justice the Default," Tiada.Guru, May 31, 2023, <https://tiada.guru/updates/fixing-the-public-ombudsman-summary-make-justice-the-default>. See arguments for an independent Public Ombudsman.

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